

An introduction to feminisms in a postfeminist age

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Abstract

The past fifteen years has witnessed a proliferation of new feminisms: postfeminism, third wave feminism, cyberfeminism, power feminism, even DIY feminism. Depending on what you read, we are either in a postfeminist era or in the third wave of feminism. But what is third wave feminism, what is its relation to the first and second waves, and is it feminist? This article offers a preliminary introduction to 'third wave' feminisms, interrogating their assumptions and agendas, comparing and contrasting them with the feminisms that emerged from 'second wave' feminism, and considering their political potential as a strategy for social change.

My interest in the political potential of what is being touted as third wave feminism was sparked by several incidents in 2007 when asked to comment on some recent media depictions of the current state, or demise, of feminism¹. The first was in relation to the possible reasons for a male being elected Women's Officer for the Student Union at Massey University's Wellington campus. I proffered what would be considered a 'stock' feminist response: many young women these days are not aware of the fragile nature of the hard-fought gains of their feminist predecessors and, not having experienced any in-your-face sexist discrimination, seem to consider feminism to be old-fashioned and irrelevant to their lives.

The second incident was being asked to comment on a competition in an on-line men's magazine where men were asked to submit a photograph of their female partner's breasts; the most deserving would win a \$10,000 boob job. I was surprised and somewhat uncomfortable about the need to consistently push beyond the line of questioning to make my point that we needed to look at the bigger picture and ask why men thought it okay to objectify their female partners in that way and what forms of masculinity and femininity supported these kinds of stereotypes. During this radio interview the interviewer made the point that "isn't the new feminism about individual choice and if women choose to have cosmetic surgery, breast implants and the like, then that was their choice and that was okay". Of course I questioned what constituted 'choice' in that scenario and insisted that feminism had never only ever been about individual women's gains and empowerment, that feminism was about the bigger picture, about social relations and systemic injustices.

The third incident was being invited as a panel speaker to the New Zealand University Students' Association annual conference to address the issue "Is Feminism Redux?" (which, as I was later to find out, is contemporary youth speak for 'redundant'). Somewhat relieved to not encounter as hostile an audience as I had expected, I focused my address on several recent events that had captured media attention: the release of the report commissioned by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, "Living at the Cutting Edge – Women's Experiences of Protection Orders" (Robertson et al., 2007); the student riots in Dunedin with the Undie 500 car race;² and the rape charges against former police officers Brad Shipton and Bob Schollum, the Assistant

1 An earlier version of this article was presented at the Women's Studies Association Conference, February 2007, held at Southern Institute of Technology, Invercargill, New Zealand.

2 The Undie 500 is an annual student car rally from Christchurch to Dunedin.

Commissioner of Police Clint Rickards and the court appearance by John Dewar, the former head of the Rotorua CIB accused of covering up the historical rape allegations.

I encouraged those present at the student conference to think critically about who was making representations about feminism, from what perspectives, and for what political agendas. I also commented that we have an interesting development in feminism – the mainstream media now gives endorsement to a ‘new feminism’ which is basically about individual women and free choice. The old feminism, the get-a-life brigade who still harp on about women’s oppression and men’s dominance, even though women are ruling the country, are still stereotyped and denigrated. The new feminism seems largely silent on issues that have absorbed the old feminism for decades; issues such as why, when we have had an Equal Pay Act since 1972, women still only get around 83-85% of men’s average wage in the same occupations, or why we still have not achieved a basic equality (assuming that equality means 50-50) of representation in parliament, on governing bodies and advisory boards, and the like. Presumably the gender pay gap and lack of equality in political representation are women’s choice?

This article is an outcome of my decision to engage more critically with the writings of third wave feminism. I am what I understand is now sometimes referred to as a ‘midwaver’.³ When the Women’s Liberation Movement burst onto the scene in New Zealand in 1972 I was aged twelve and in my second year of Intermediate School. I do not remember being particularly aware of the ‘women’s libbers’ although I did start attending Reclaim the Night marches in Christchurch in the early 1980s. Others referred to me as a feminist before I had any real understanding of what that label meant. When I started to engage with ‘academic feminism’ the analysis focused on sex role stereotyping and sexist language. So I developed my understandings of feminism through the writings and activism of second wave feminism. Although younger than my feminist sisters who were living their feminisms in the 1970s, I have felt like one of the ‘older’ feminists for at least a decade, since one of my students declared that I was older than her mother!

One feminist who was there in the 1970s was Charlotte Bunch who, in 1996, described her relationship to feminism as ‘ambivalent’. Having been a key contributor to the development of lesbian feminist perspectives in the 1970s and 1980s, she no longer considered herself qualified to teach feminist theory because, as she put it, “I don’t know what it has become” (Bunch, cited in Hartmann et. al., 1996, p.923.). The last two decades have been marked by an increasing divide between academic feminist theory and grass roots feminist activism, and an increasing rejection of the label ‘feminist’. Depending on who you read, we are either in a post-feminist era or in the third wave of feminism. I know I am not alone in feeling a sense of discomfort and, at times, displacement, in relation to the ‘new’ feminisms.

A diversity of feminisms, in tension and, at times, in contradiction with each other, is not a new phenomenon. From the time feminist theories began to be formalised in an academic context, tensions and contradictions emerged as a plurality of perspectives was developed. As their names denote, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism and the like were feminist adaptations of traditional accepted bodies of theory. Feminist texts such as Rosemarie Tong’s (1992) *Feminist Thought* and Alison Jaggar’s (1983) *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* were careful to explicate the theoretical roots of these perspectives, as well as to discuss how they might explain and analyse various aspects of women’s oppression. Those of us teaching in academia continue to teach these perspectives alongside other approaches within feminist theory, albeit in a manner that is careful to critique the inadequacies and limitations of these taxonomy approaches.

³ See Kinser (2004), footnote 1.

These days there's a new bunch of feminisms on the block: postfeminism (Holmlund, 2005), third wave feminism (Kinser, 2004), cyberfeminism (Hawthorne & Klein, 1999), youth feminism (Mack-Canty, 2004), power feminism (Wolf, 1993), even DIY feminism (Bail, 1996; Karp & Stoller, 1999). With the exception of postfeminism, which, being influenced by the highly abstract, and some might add apolitical and inaccessible theoretical jargon of postmodernist theory, most of these 'new' feminisms eschew theory in its formal academic sense in favour of an individualised experiential version of feminism (see Siegel, 1997). But are these new feminisms feminist? The next section of this article offers an overview of some of the concerns and debates within the literature on third wave feminisms. This is followed by a preliminary introduction to third wave feminisms. In identifying their key influences and characteristics, and interrogating their assumptions and agendas, I am motivated by considering the political potential of third wave feminism as a strategy for social change. An underlying question behind my discussion is whether third wave feminism is a new type of feminism, indeed, whether it is new and whether it is feminist, or whether it more accurately refers to a younger generation of activists whose concerns intersect, at times, with those of earlier generations of feminists.

Debating the third wave

Before focusing in more depth on the key features of third wave feminisms, this section offers a brief overview of some of the main themes and issues that have emerged and been debated in the literature relating to third wave feminisms that has proliferated since the mid-1990s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the wave metaphor itself has been found to be problematic. As Cathryn Bailey (1997) points out, the second wave of feminism was so named as a means of emphasising continuity with earlier feminist activities and ideas, and the metaphor therefore denotes some sort of succession. But this not only conflicts with the ways in which many proponents of third wave feminism characterise their feminism as being a distinct and deliberate break with the agendas and priorities of second wave feminism, it also tends to obscure the continuities of feminisms between designated 'waves'. Likewise, by drawing attention to the common themes that unify each wave, the notion of a wave tends to obscure the diversity of the competing feminisms that exist within any given period and the contributions made by more marginalised members of the women's movement (Mann & Huffman, 2005). In the New Zealand context, Christine Dann foreshadowed these issues in her history of the Women's Liberation Movement published in 1985 in her use of the metaphor of a feminist continuum to emphasise the connections between the first and second waves. Dann stated:

The Women's Liberation Movement is sometimes referred to as the "second wave" of feminism, because it represents a level of organisation and militancy amongst women which had not been seen since the suffrage movement of the nineteenth century. The "first wave" – named in retrospect by women's liberationists who had still to discover how much feminist activism had been "hidden from history" – broke very early in New Zealand... While the W[omen's] L[iberation] M[ovement] was a new, and distinctive, form of feminism, it must still be seen as part of the feminist continuum. (Dann, 1985, p.4)

According to Anita Harris, debate over the next wave has contributed to particular representations of young women and their relations to feminism in ways that have framed "competing discourses about young feminists as 'power feminists' fighting 'victim feminism', girl-powered Do-It-Yourselfers developing a new style of sassy, in-your-face feminism, or the 'third wave' simply grasping the baton from the previous generation" (Harris, 2001, n.p.). Despite these critiques, the metaphor remains useful for describing the existence of mass-based feminist movements that ebb and flow, rise and decline, and crest in specific historical accomplishments (and defeats). For this reason, Mann and Huffman (2005) caution that waves of feminism should not

be viewed as equivalent with the history of feminism but that waves “are simply those historical eras when feminism had a mass base” (p. 58).

Closely linked to debates about the efficacy of the wave metaphor is debate around the familial framing of feminisms in terms of generational feminism. One of the identified hallmarks of generational feminism is its propensity to diverge from the political priorities and strategies of its forebears. However, like the wave metaphor, the notion of a generational feminism invokes both the assumption of “a blanket generational experience” and a model of “generational cleavage” (Long, 2001, n.p.). It also constructs feminism as a coming-of-age issue which, in a third wave feminist rhetoric amounts to figuring out one’s own feminism being part of a girl’s rite of passage.⁴ For others, however, the issue is not how or whether as feminists we pass on feminism to younger generations, because feminism has been positioned as having already passed away. Whether in the form of feminism’s symbolic demise (Hawkesworth, 2004) or of postmodernism’s more calculated killing off of feminism (Nurka, 2002), the so-called demise of feminism is linked to a rejection of the feminist label (see Olson et. al., 2008; Snelling, 1999), the problematic relationship between the identities young women are producing and their effect on the increasingly fragmented project of second wave feminism (Budgeon, 2001), and the co-option of feminist agendas by neoliberal individualism (Ringrose, 2007).

The so-called demise of feminism has also been linked more specifically to a feminist backlash and to the rise of postmodern agendas. Sherryl Vint (1997) has analysed how recent films do not vilify feminism but try to make the concerns of feminism seem comedic by positing that we live in a postmodern gender utopia. Others have focused on how television (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006) and the mainstream print media (Bronstein, 2005) have framed the new feminist movement and how third wave feminist tenets have been appropriated by postmodern media (Shugart et al., 2001). Alongside such critiques of the media’s framing and appropriation of third wave feminist agendas is the call to consider how third wave feminists understand and define their own movement (Fixmer & Wood, 2005; Gilley, 2005).

Key influences on third wave feminism

Based on the United States experience, four major perspectives have been identified as contributing to the new discourse of third wave feminism: intersectionality theory as developed by women of colour; postmodernist and poststructuralist feminist approaches; feminist postcolonial theory (often referred to as global feminism); and the agenda of the new generation of younger feminists (Mann & Huffman, 2005). The first two of these perspectives, intersectionality theory and postmodern and poststructuralist feminist approaches, shared a focus on difference; but whereas feminists of colour embraced identity politics as a key to liberation, postmodern and poststructuralist feminists critically questioned the notion of coherent identities and viewed freedom as resistance to categorisation and identity. The other two major perspectives, feminist postcolonial theory and the agendas of younger feminists, grew out of the challenges posed by feminists of colour and postmodern and poststructuralist approaches. The first three of these four major perspectives can be traced in academic approaches to feminism. Of particular interest here is the fourth perspective, that of younger feminists. Key influences that have impacted on their political agendas include postfeminism, the rights and visibility of sexual minorities and other legacies of first and second wave feminisms, and individualism. Each of these shall be addressed briefly in turn.

4 For further discussion of these debates, see Adkins (2004).

Postfeminism is a slippery beast. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgement of feminism's success, while simultaneously attributing feminism's successes not to feminist endeavour but to "a natural cultural evolution" (Kinser, 2004, p. 134). Postfeminism is a seductive perspective which "co-opts the motivating discourse of feminism but accepts a sense of empowerment as a substitute for the work toward and evidence of authentic empowerment" (Kinser, 2004, p. 134). In Georgina Murray's view, postfeminism is "a theoretical diversion which may gain us useful insights on the human condition but is a sidetrack to the feminist struggle for equality" (Murray, 1997, p. 37).

Chris Holmlund (2005) has identified three versions of postfeminism: academic postfeminism, 'chick postfeminism' and 'grrrl postfeminism'. According to Holmlund, 'academic postfeminists' are steeped in French, British and American postmodern, postcolonial, poststructural and queer theory; 'chick postfeminists' are usually young and are either hostile to the goals and gains of second wave feminism or simply take them for granted; and 'Grrrl postfeminists' are "politically engaged yet playful" and eager to carry on the feminist struggles of the first and second waves (Holmlund, 2005, p. 116). The prefix 'post', of course, denotes 'after', and this alerts us to the defining feature of postfeminism:

Post-feminism assumes that the women's movement took care of oppressive institutions, and that now it is up to individual women to make personal choices that simply reinforce those fundamental societal changes. (Orr, 1997, p. 34)

In other words, 'feminist' politics become a matter of personal style or individual choice and any emphasis on organised intervention is regarded as naive and even oppressive to women. As some commentators have pointed out, this represents an inversion of the 1970's feminist slogan "the personal is political"; in the third wave, the political is personal (Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 74).

But the very concept of postfeminism is, in my view, not only premature, but another manifestation of postcolonialism. To state that the women's movement has taken care of women's oppressions is to ignore the many fundamental inequities and inequalities that continue to exist in contemporary societies. It is also clearly premised upon a western mindset. In her hard-hitting article "Sexism by a subtler name?" Judith Stacey (1990) refers to post-feminism as "the simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism" (p. 339). One key area in which this incorporation, revision and depoliticisation occurs is in third wave feminist approaches to sexuality.

Coinciding with gay rights movements, a significant achievement of second wave feminism was the way in which sexuality came out of the closet, so to speak, and was recognised as playing a key role in the construction of gender and the maintenance and perpetuation of unequal gender relations. Second wave lesbian feminist theorising in the 1970s and 1980s introduced an analysis of the operation of the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexism. The 'sexuality debates' of these decades canvassed the politics of sexuality, focusing on issues such as pornography and sex work, the politics associated with pleasure and danger, and role playing in sexual practices such as sadomasochism or butch/femme relationships. The debates themselves were complex and a spectrum of positions, all asserting themselves as feminist, could be identified on any given issue. A constant theme that emerged was tension between what were seen as libertarian positions and what were later to be judged as politically correct feminist positions. These tensions are still evident in feminist contributions to more recent debates in New Zealand such as the Prostitution Reform Bill and the Civil Union Bill. In the former, some feminists based their arguments on a human rights position in which sex workers should be entitled to the protection of the law; others provided feminist analysis of prostitution

as devaluing women and upholding the gendered power inequalities of compulsory heterosexuality. In the debates around the Civil Union Bill, pro-Civil Union feminists employed the human rights argument while anti-Civil Union feminists argued on the basis of a rejection of heterosexual marriage as a normative institution by which same-sex relationships should be compared.

For the purpose of my current concerns, the key point here is not so much that there has always been a plurality of often incompatible feminist positions on particular issues, but that second wave feminist theorists theorised all of these issues and analysed the politics of these different positions. The issue at stake is that third wave feminism is heavily influenced by post-modernist perspectives which “seem to say ‘yes’ indiscriminately to all forms of ‘disruptive’ sexuality” and, by doing so, “sanction the production of new sexualities without providing coherent political strategies through which to evaluate them” (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p. 12).

A recent ‘feminist’ documentary titled “The Naked Feminist” serves as an illustration. The trailer accompanying this film, which won an Emerging Visions Audience Award in the SXSW Film Festival in 1994, reads:

The Naked Feminist challenges the mythology surrounding women in the porn industry head on through a series of candid interviews with pornstars, academics and feminists. This 58 minute documentary film seeks to strip away the ideological straitjacket surrounding the decades old ‘porn v feminist’ debate by demonstrating that strong, inspirational women are found in all walks of life – including pornography.

The film is built mainly on interviews with women who are considered to be “The American Masters” of Porn [...]. A candid behind-the-scenes look at the making of one of Christi Lake’s “Fan Fuxxx” videos further explodes notions of control, pleasure and exploitation in this sexy, funny, informative and provocative film. (Welcome to the Naked Feminist, 2004)

‘Entrepreneurial’ women, it would seem, can be claimed as feminist – only in America perhaps; only in a postfeminist third wave for sure!

It must be pointed out that such positions with respect to expressions of sexuality, fields of employment, and independent and funded access to media productions are only possible because third wave feminists have inherited a legacy of minority rights, sexual freedoms, employment opportunities, and all manner of legislated rights from the activism of first and second wave feminists.

The Naked Feminist example also illustrates a third key influence on third wave feminism, namely, individualism. Shugart, Waggoner and Hallstein (2001) describe it in this way:

They are evident everywhere in the mass media today: Scores of outspoken, vibrant, defiant young women, vocal about sexism and endowed with an exhilarating sense of entitlement based precisely on their gender, are demanding our attention. Popular culture touts this phenomenon as a “brand-new feminism” that appears to take gender equity for granted, is more self-obsessed, wed to the culture of celebrity, primarily concerned with sexual self-revelation, and focused on the body rather than social change. (p. 194)

As a number of commentators have observed, “empowerment takes on a different meaning in this new feminism” and tends to manifest itself in very individualistic terms:

Being empowered in the third wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are. Vigorous assertion of one’s individuality...is highly prized by third wavers, such that an “in-your-face,” confrontational attitude also can be described as a hallmark of the third wave. (Shugart et al., p. 195)

Take, for example, the politics of ‘power feminists’. According to Elizabeth Wurtzel:

These days putting out one’s pretty power, one’s pussy power, one’s sexual energy for popular consumption no longer makes you a bimbo. It makes you smart. (Wurtzel, cited in Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 141)

Likewise, Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller, editors of *The Bust Guide to the New World Order*, declare that “our tits and hips and lips – are power tools” (Karp & Stoller, 1999, p. 7). The Bust Guide is described as “a sort of Our Bodies, Ourselves for Generation XX” that “brings together the best and funniest writings from the front lines of feminism” (Karp & Stoller, Back Cover). As Mann and Huffman (2005) have rightly observed, “The free-to-be-me feminisms of some spokespersons for the third wave transgress our notion that mutuality and collective well-being are lynchpins of an emancipatory feminism” (pp. 77-78) while Dicker and Piepmeier (2003) conclude that this type of “feminist free-for-all...empties feminism of any core set of values and politics” (p. 17).

What is third wave feminism?

So what is third wave feminism? Is it a movement, a new discourse on gender relations, a shift from the second wave focus on gender equality to concern about oppression more generally (Mack-Canty & Wright, 2004), or is it an identity embraced by a younger generation of feminists and therefore a subculture of Generation X rather than a part of feminism (Purvis, 2004)?

The earliest mention of third wave in relation to feminism has been traced to the mid-1980s with the compilation of *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism* which was never published. The term resurfaced in the United States in relation to two high-profile court cases when one hundred young feminists gathered in New York City and organised an activist network they called “The Third Wave”. Its stated vision was:

To become a national network for young feminists; to politicize and organize young women from diverse cultural backgrounds; to strengthen the relationship between young women and older feminists; and to consolidate a strong base of membership able to mobilize for specific issues, political candidates, and events. (Dulin, cited in Orr, 1997, p. 30)

Despite these initial intentions of intergenerational sisterhood, third wave feminism has been described as a “new style of rebellion based on a misremembered, or at least extremely narrow, version of the history [of second wave feminism]” (Orr, 1997, p. 32).

As in the case of first and second wave feminisms, third wave feminism is not a uniform perspective. Multivocality has been identified as an informing trope of the third wave narrative (Siegel, 1997), which includes “a number of diverse and analytically distinct approaches to feminism” focusing on difference, deconstruction, and decentring (Mann & Huffman, 2005, p. 57). Third wavers have also been constructed as ‘a political generation’, or, as Nancy Whittier explains:

A group of people (not necessarily of the same age) that experiences shared formative social conditions at approximately the same point in their lives, and that holds a common interpretive framework shaped by historical circumstances. (Whittier, cited in Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p.9)

According to Amber Kinser (2004), third wave feminism “represents a complex effort to negotiate a space between second-wave and postfeminism thought” (Kinser, 2004, p. 135). Deborah Siegel (1997) analyses it as “a stance of political resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium on feminism and feminists” (p. 52) while the editors of *Third Wave Agenda: Doing Feminism, Being Feminist* argue that the third wave is “a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures while also acknowledging and making sense of the pleasure, danger and defining power of those structures” (Heywood & Drake, 1997, p. 11).

Although she defines herself as a third wave feminist, Jo Trigilio says she has trouble understanding the constitution of a third wave. Observing that, unlike the first and second waves which were marked by large, distinct activist movements, “third wave seems to be more of an

academic construction, used to mark the development of postmodern critiques of second wave feminism". She adds that she cannot help thinking that "one must be a postmodernist to be a third waver" (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p. 8). Rita Alfonso, on the other hand, considers that "being hip to a postmodernist scene places you squarely outside the third wave camp" (Alfonso & Trigilio, 1997, p. 9). She identifies a number of perspectives that do not fit neatly into either the second or third waves, such as the critiques of women of colour or the grass roots AIDS activist working under the rubric of Queer Nation. Alfonso concludes that both the second and the third waves are being constructed too narrowly.

Key features of third wave feminism

The most publicised feature of third wave feminism is its critique and rejection of many aspects of second wave feminism. According to Rebecca Walker, younger feminists have inherited an understanding that to be a feminist means to conform to an identity and way of living that does not allow for individuality, complexity, or "less than perfect personal histories" (Walker, cited in Bailey, 1997, p. 21). As co-founder and president of Third Wave, the previously mentioned organisation based in the United States devoted to young feminist activism, and editor of *To be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995), Walker has been very influential in shaping and disseminating understandings of this 'new feminism' in the United States, and globally through the internet. As Cathryn Bailey observes, many of the contributors to Walker's collection convey the sense that "the feminism of their mothers' generation is naïve, obsolete, or otherwise somehow lacking in relevance to their lives" (Bailey, 1997, p. 21). The point at issue is that their picture of feminism bears many similarities with that portrayed by the backlash media which constructs second wave feminists as "humorless, too angry, unconcerned about their appearance, and fanatically invested in 'political correctness'" (Bailey, 1997, p. 22). Likewise, in her contribution to a forum on the politics of identity, Ruth Lister (2005) commented on the expressions of antipathy towards feminism generally but by young women in particular who view feminism as: anti-men; anti-feminine; anti-family; over-prescriptive; interfering in private lives; humourless, dowdy and puritanical; and a source of oppression rather than liberation. As Catherine Orr (1997) notes, "this kind of historical reduction fits too well within conservative's attempts to expose what they consider to be feminism's overbearing excesses" (p. 31).

While it is inevitable and politically useful to evaluate the successes and failures of second wave feminism, it is both the manner in which this is done by third wave feminists as well as the reductionism, homogenising and misinterpretation of second wave feminist analysis that is of concern to older generations of academic feminists. For example, in *Fire with Fire: The new female power and how it will change the 21st century* (1993), Naomi Wolf (of *The Beauty Myth* fame) seeks to reconstruct second wave feminism as a civil rights movement for women. She argues that we have to throw off the yoke of victimisation and embrace 'power feminism' (Wolf, 1993). Five years later in 1998, British journalist Natasha Walter published *The New Feminism* in which women were urged to cast off a "tendency towards Puritanism and political correctness", particularly in the area of female sexuality (Walter, 1998, p. 76). Seeing the second wave as some kind of failed experiment, is, as Deborah Siegel (1997) and Amber Kinser (2004) have noted, another form of the postfeminist lie.

Alongside this critique and rejection of second wave feminism and the emphasis on individual empowerment, third wave feminism is also characterised by what has been called 'performance politics' by a media-savvy generation, and a penchant for personal narratives. The latter, as has already been noted, tends to be at the expense of the rigorous theory that was a

hallmark of second wave feminisms.

Third wave feminisms: waving or drowning?

In her article “Unpacking the Mother/Daughter Baggage: Reassessing Second- and Third-Wave Tensions”, Cathryn Bailey treats younger women’s criticisms of second wave feminisms as legitimate expressions of resistance. But she is quick to add that as forms of resistance they do not necessarily require rendering false earlier feminist claims. In fact, Bailey argues that “to some extent it is a testament to the success of feminism that such teaching produces younger feminist subjects who resist, on feminist terms, the very feminism that has helped to shape them” (Bailey, 2002, p. 141).

But if this is one of feminism’s successes, it still leaves me with a questioning of the direction in which third wave feminists seem to be taking feminism. When I first began writing this article my framing question was “Is third wave feminism feminist?” Uncomfortable with the provocative confrontational nature of that question I reframed my question to ask why, as a feminist academic teaching in the field of Women’s Studies, I felt profoundly unsettled by many of the writings of third wave feminists. In response to my own question, I want to close with some observations regarding practising feminism in a postfeminist age. Originally framed as my critiques of third wave feminism, in the spirit of finding spaces to create dialogue between second and third wave feminists I have reframed them as what second, third and mid-wavers need to develop and prioritise if we want feminism to continue to be a defining force for social change.

Firstly, as feminists we need theory that will enable us to analyse social relations and strategise in our work towards equity and social justice. Reflecting on, and sharing, personal experiences is a necessary first step to understanding how our personal circumstances relate to wider social structures.⁵ Second wavers called this consciousness raising. But raised consciousnesses do not effect social change. Theory is a tool. A good theory would accurately describe the social realities of women’s subordination, provide an explanation of how those realities came to be, and offer recommendations for transforming those realities (Jaggar & Rosenberg, 1993).

Secondly, we need to know our history. Back in the 1970s and 1980s when feminists such as Sheila Rowbotham, Dale Spender and Gerda Lerner were writing books such as *Hidden from History* (Rowbotham, 1973), *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* (Spender, 1988) and *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Lerner, 1979), we learned about women of earlier generations, about their lives, their writing, and their activism. Part of knowing our history these days is learning about the generation of second wave feminists – their political priorities, their analyses of gender relations, and their activism. With that knowledge we can be better prepared to analyse contemporary social relations and strategise for change.

Thirdly, in this postfeminist age of individualism, materialism and consumer culture, we need very robust analyses of agency and of resistance and subversion. Feminism is not simply about an individual woman choosing how she will live her life, and it is not sufficient to claim that an individual’s *intention* to resist and subvert dominant power structures or societal conventions equates to feminist resistance and subversion.

Those of you who know your feminist history will know that none of these observations are startlingly new. But if feminism is to return to its status as a contemporary social movement, and if we are to find ways to practise feminism in this postfeminist age, we have to be up front

5 See, for example, the sections “Origins”, “Conditions not of her own making”, “Truths” and “Whose Voice” in Personal Narratives Group (1989).

about the fact that some of the old ways of seeing and understanding things are not up to the task and some of the new ways of doing things may be missing the mark. As Cathryn Bailey (2002) points out:

We cannot assess the meaning of younger women's actions and attitudes without recognizing that the back-drop against which their actions are performed is, in many cases, significantly different. (p. 145)

The real challenge of practising feminism in a postfeminist age is how committed feminists, of whatever generation, work together in feminist ways in the pursuit of the feminist goals of gender, equity and social justice.

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